

# GENITAL HERPES



**Answers to your questions  
about Genital Herpes  
and how it is treated**



## What is genital herpes (HSV)?

Genital herpes is a common infection caused by a virus. It can infect both the mouth and the genitals. Herpes Type 1 (HSV-1) causes most mouth sores that are called “fever blisters” or “cold sores.” Herpes Type 2 (HSV-2) causes most genital and anal sores. However, both types can infect either place. It is unusual for people with HSV-2 to also get HSV-1.

Millions of people have herpes, but many of them don't know they have it because they have no symptoms or very mild symptoms. It is passed on when contact is made with the sores. This can happen through vaginal intercourse, oral sex or anal sex. Scientists have discovered that people with herpes can shed the virus even when they don't have sores. This happens at the site of the original infection. It is unclear how contagious this shedding might be.

Having herpes can make it easier to get other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), especially HIV, because herpes sores are a path for germs to enter the body.

If a woman gets herpes for the first time while she is pregnant, there can be serious problems. For example, if a woman has active genital herpes when she goes into labor, a cesarean delivery is usually done. Fortunately, infection of a baby from a woman with herpes infection is rare. Be sure to tell your doctor if you or a partner has ever had herpes.

*There is a lot of shame attached to getting genital herpes, probably because getting it means you've had sex. This is unfortunate because herpes is a relatively minor disease that only sometimes causes pain and discomfort. If you are careful and take medicine when you need to, you will have a completely normal life.*

## **What are the signs and symptoms?**

Not everyone has noticeable signs. Blister-like sores that itch, burn or tingle may appear 2–21 days after sex with an infected person. They look a lot like chicken pox sores. The sores can be very painful and sometimes people feel like they have the flu. The sores usually last from 1–3 weeks the first time they appear. Scabs form and the sores heal but the virus stays hidden in the body. More sores may appear later, but not always.

It is unclear what causes a new outbreak and it is different for every person. Some causes include getting sick, stress, getting overly tired, having a skin irritation (such as sunburn), diet, menstruation or vigorous sexual intercourse. There is some evidence that taking birth control pills can help cause an outbreak.

Some people may have several outbreaks each year. Some people may have only one. Later outbreaks tend to have fewer and less painful sores and they heal faster than the first outbreak. Some people stop having outbreaks altogether.

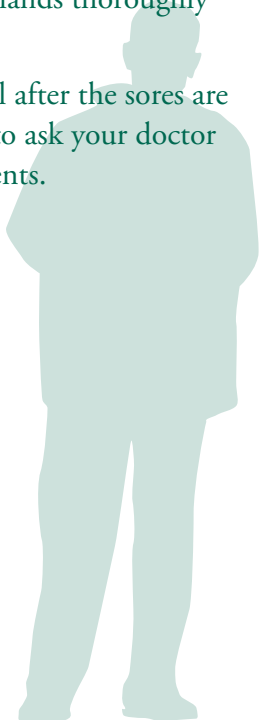
## How is genital herpes tested?

The fluid from new sores is very easily tested, but you must get to the doctor right away. Once the sores start to heal they cannot be tested. Blood tests can also be done, but the results are not always clear.

## How is genital herpes treated?

Because it is a virus, herpes cannot be cured. It can be treated with medicine that reduces the number and severity of future outbreaks. These medicines should not be taken if you are pregnant, so be sure to talk with your doctor. If you have sores, try to keep the area clean and dry. Don't touch the sores. If you do touch one by mistake, wash your hands thoroughly afterwards.

It's best not to have sex until after the sores are completely healed. Be sure to ask your doctor regularly about new treatments.



## How can genital herpes be prevented?

**Don't have sex.** Abstinence is the surest way to avoid getting herpes.

**Be faithful.** Have sex with only one other person whom you trust. Sexual fidelity with someone who is not infected means that you won't get herpes from them and, if you're not infected, they won't get it from you.

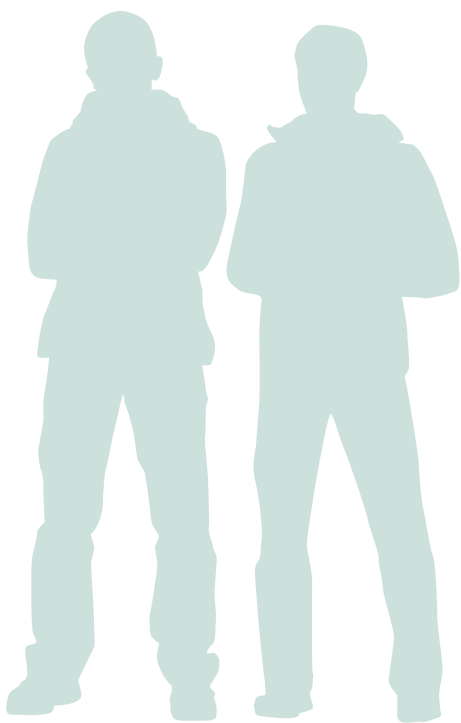
**Use condoms.** They aren't 100% effective, but if you choose to have sex, latex condoms can be a good protection against herpes. Learn how to use condoms correctly and use a new one every time you have sex.

**Don't have sex when you have herpes sores.** You are most contagious at this time and sex would most likely be painful for you.

**Tell your partner if you have had herpes.** Because herpes can be spread even when there are no sores, your partner needs to protect themselves.

**Don't mix drugs and alcohol with sex.** Getting drunk or high can affect your ability to make smart decisions about sex.

**Have fewer partners.** The more people you have sex with, the greater your chances of getting herpes.



If you have questions or need more  
information, call your doctor, local health  
department or clinic.

Or call the  
**STD National Hotline**  
**1-800-227-8922**



For persons with disabilities, this document is available  
on request in other formats. To submit a request, please  
call 1-800-525-0127 (TDD/TTY 1-800-833-6388).



DOH Pub 347-006 12/2007





**Dear Colleague,**

The Washington State Department of Health (DOH) is pleased to provide camera-ready art for printing this educational material. To ensure that the original quality of the piece is maintained, please read and follow the instructions below and the specifications included for professional printing.

- **Use the latest version.** DOH materials are developed using the most current information available, are checked for clinical accuracy, and are field tested with the intended audience to ensure they are clear and readable. DOH programs make periodic revisions to educational materials, so please check this web site to be sure you have the latest version. DOH assumes no responsibility for the use of this material or for any errors or omissions.
- **Do not alter.** We are providing this artwork with the understanding that it will be printed without alterations and copies will be free to the public. Do not edit the text or use illustrations or photographs for other purposes without first contacting us. Please do not alter or remove the DOH logo, publication number or revision date. If you want to use a part of this publication for other purposes, contact the Office of Health Promotion first.
- **For quality reproduction:** Low resolution PDF files are intended for black and white or color desktop printers. They work best if you are making only one or two copies. High resolution PDF files are intended for reproducing large quantities and are set up for use by professional offset print shops. The high resolution files also include detailed printing specifications. Please match them as closely as possible and insist on the best possible quality for all reproductions.

If you have questions, contact:

Office of Health Promotion

P.O. Box 47833 Olympia, WA 98504-7833

(360) 236-3736

**Sincerely,**

**Health Education Resource Exchange Web Team**